

# A summary of the evolution of jokes in Persian in the last millennium: an analysis of structure and content

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## Abstract

*One thing that any language provides for the speakers of every nation and society is humour. Humour and jokes are amongst the unique characteristics and features of any nation and its language. The type of jokes considering structure and content differ from one society to another. Also, even within one society, jokes differ from one era to another. Jokes in Persian have seen great changes since the past to present day and these changes have been both in structure and content. In this study, Persian jokes have been investigated from the very first cases of about a thousand years ago to the very present ones, considering their structural and conceptual features. As a result, Persian jokes were categorized into three generations: first generation (the old-fashioned stories), second generation (the patterns), and third generation (the new version). In the end, it was observed that jokes in Persian have gone through the right path over the passage of time.*

*Keywords: humour, joke, laughter, satire, Persian.*

## 1. Introduction

“Molla was looking for his ring in the alley... a neighbour passing by asked:

- What have you lost, Molla?
- My ring.
- Where did you lose it?
- In my house.
- Then why are you searching the alley?
- Because it is dark in the house.”

(Anecdote from Molla-Nasr-e-Ddin, old Persian satire character)

The oldest cases of jokes are those found in old stories or poems. That type and form of humour and joke gave its place to the short humorous stories telling something that included a sort of fun. Then there was the verbal form told from friend to friend, father to family or neighbour to neighbour; those that are not too old to not be able to be studied. As the time went by, just as the form of jokes changed, the content and media, through which the joke moved, changed too. And this was in response to the social, cultural and political status of the time. A joke which had a high level of humour concept and popularity among the society ten or twenty years ago, may no longer cause any humour or laughter now; or even the audience may not be able to figure out the humorous and funny point; or at a lower level, the listeners easily find out the old-fashioned being of the joke.

Jokes can be studied from two main points of view: content and structure. Studies clearly show that the structural features of a joke are as significant as its content, considering the *conflict* and *nonsense* types of joke structures (Ruch, 1981; Ruch & Platt, 2012). Therefore, content and structure of humour have long been considered as two different sources of pleasure with different names: joke work vs. tendency (Freud, 1905), thematic vs. schematic (Sears, 1934), or cognitive vs. orrectic factors (Eysenck, 1942; after Raskin, 2008).

Apart from the specific humour type and feature in any society, there are specific features for humour in every period of time. Polimeni and Reiss (2006) claim that if something wants to be funny, it must rely on careful language and relation to a good understanding of social realities. Cowan (2019) confirms that in order to have a good knowledge of the nature of the evolution of humour, it is crucial to know that although humour and laughter, in general, are universal, it is not necessarily true that humour is understood and applied on universally similar terms. This indicates that humour, too, just like any other part or element of language, is strongly dependent on and interconnected with the language's speakers' culture. Humour strongly depends on culture since symbols, stereotypes and codes related to when or where it has been created have a strong effect on it (Boskin, 1997).

In the present time, the internet has taken the responsibility for the transportation of significant amounts of humorous content. The internet has caused huge changes not only in the form, but also in the content of jokes. Attardo and Chabanne (1992), in their paper on jokes as a text type, explain how humorous points can be created by the interaction of visuals and text. This was one of the first cases reported for the changes that the internet has done to the world of humour. Another example of changes in jokes caused by the internet, as Chiaro (2018) claims, is that we have shifted from slow humour to fast humour, saying that we live in a fast-moving, online world that quickly grows tired of yesterday's news. An example of this can be the widespread use of memes which mostly contain a small number of words, compared to jokes.

The abovementioned evolutionary processes can be traced within humour and jokes in Persian and in Iran. Based on what was discussed above, the present study aims to investigate the evolution of Persian jokes from the earliest available cases around one thousand years ago up to the present-time jokes in Persian and Iran. This investigation is, in the first step, based on joke structure since the structure of jokes in Persian has seen huge changes since a millennium ago. In the second step, the changes in the content of jokes within this time period are discussed. The present study considered three different generations for Persian jokes. The first, or the oldest joke or joke-like structure in Persian studied here, dates back to more than one thousand years ago, which starts the discussion on the first generation. This generation continues with Molla Nasre Ddin's anecdotes and ends with ethnic popular jokes. The emergence and wide spread of social media formed the second generation of jokes and the newest cases are taken from the present humour in Iran, which forms the third generation whose peak of appearance and spread can be traced within two to five years ago (2018 to present). Compared to the almost static structure of jokes in the first generation for a

considerably long period of time, the last two generations have an almost dynamic structure and are still undertaking structural and conceptual changes.

## **2. Literature review**

Considering a historical view, a considerable number of studies have been conducted on humour and jokes in Persian so far, the most related of which are the following. A study that is in many ways close to the present work is the history of satire in Persian literature by Javadi (2005). He clearly shows that the history of satire in Persian literature is not limited to the writings of Obeyd Zakani and a few others, and that tens of Iranian writers have reflected the suffocating conditions and political restrictions governing the society within a thousand years in their writings using satire. Javadi's book provides precise definitions of satire and its good and bad forms, details on similarities and differences in Iranian and western satire, satire in social protests with reference to religion/politics/women, and satire genres in Persian stories and plays. The book, however, deals only with the old satirists of Iran.

Föllmer (2008) investigated satire in Iran from 1990 to 2000. She considers satire as a significant part of contemporary literature and media culture in Iran. She believes that the limits of social and moral taboos are almost clear in Iranian satire. The study investigates satirical columns in the Iranian press, which have appeared in various print media and were of particular importance for the social establishment and formation of Iranian satire, such as the column "*Do kalame harf-e hesaab*" in Ettela'at newspaper and *Gol Aqa* magazine. Nonetheless, Föllmer's (2008) study gives no discussions on previous or later satire in Iran.

Another related book is "A thousand years of satirical stories of Persian literature (from Ferdowsi Toosi to Mullah Habibullah Kashani)" by Vakilian and Jafari Qanawati (2012). The book has the purpose of introducing previous samples of Persian satirical stories. It provides forty anecdotes from great men and women of literature and wisdom in the history of Iran, such as Hakim Abulqasem Ferdowsi, Nizami Ganjavi, Saaduddin Varavini, Jalaluddin Mohammad Molavi, Obeyd Zakani, Vahshi Bafqi, and others. The study, like Javadi's (2005), investigates Persian satire in its old form, i.e., the anecdote format.

Siamian, Ahmadvand and Kargar (2017) have studied literary satire and the socio-cultural history of Iran in the mid-Islamic centuries. Their findings show that the literary type of satire in Persian literature, in its specific and new meaning, which is known as a critical sense of humour, had no place in the early history of Persian literature. They claim that through six centuries, considering the social, cultural and political history of Iran, Persian literary satire has transformed into a much larger and much more social phenomenon. The study tried to have a look at transformational processes which took place in Persian satire.

Nazari Monazzam and Azarnia (2016) conducted a comparative study of satire in Jahez (the father of Arab satire literature) and Obeyd Zakani (the father of Persian satire literature). Based on the study, what made the two writers tend toward satire literature was their social status of the time and, therefore, their satire is social and political with the aim of reforming.

Jowzi and Karimzadeh (2020) have investigated the strategies for political satire in Dehkhoda's works. They believe that the Constitutional Period should be considered as the time of the evolution of political satire. Dehkhoda was one of the greatest literates and poets of that period. A number of his works such as *Amsaal-o Hekam* (Proverbs and Sayings) (Dehkhoda, 2016b) are full of political and satirical poetry. In the present study, the Constitutional Period has been considered as one of the bridge stages in the evolution of Persian satire.

Aqayani Chavoshi (2017) investigated the strategy of satire and its types in Shams' writings. Aqayani states that considering Shams' character and also the necessity and the

application of satire in transferring wisdom and knowledge teachings, the presence of satire in Shams' writings is expectable. Lexical, conceptual and narrative humour are among the most significant types of satire used in Shams' writings. Also, as Aqayani states, there is a shadow of satire throughout the whole writings.

Boloori (2015) conducted a critical and analytical study of political satires in prose and poem Persian texts in fourth to eighth centuries. The most significant feature of satire in the mentioned time period has been fighting the tyranny of kings or extremist religious governors/rulers, sarcasm and ridiculing extreme religious beliefs, political behaviours, and political satire with philosophical view. What Boloori (2015) argued is the cornerstone of later purposeful satire in Iran.

Asadollahi and Lotfi (2016) investigated the stylistics of Hafiz' satire. Hafiz' satire writing style has risen from the social status and context of the eighth century of Iran. As Asadollahi and Lotfi claim, "Hafiz is a peace seeking poet who, from his satire, had the purpose of fighting the injustice of the time. His critical satire is insidious and can be divided into social, religious, philosophical and political. His satire has an indirect, soft tone and is full of literary devices. The literary level of his satirical poems is as high as the content. The most prominent strategies of creating satire by Hafiz include paradox, amphibology and irony".

Asadollahi and Lotfi (2016) investigated the stylistics of Hafiz's satire, highlighting its roots in the socio-political context of eighth-century Iran. They state:

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(Asadollahi & Lotfi, 2016, p. 7).

Karami, Riyahi Zamin and Dehqanian (2009) conducted a study in the theory and function of Constitution satire. They believe that the Constitution made a big change in Persian literary texts. This change, according to Karami, Riyahi Zamin and Dehqanian (2009), has been in the area of audience, function, diversity, and language. But later, the long-lasting domination of poetry was ended by prose. The abovementioned authors believe that the biggest change was in language. The high level of the language's tone in literature changed into a free tool of saying whatever necessary, which in turn resulted in a wide tendency towards satire. The result is a theory called "Satire and Social Fault", which "considers satire as the result of a social fault between different groups of a society or among different societies" (Karami, Riyahi Zamin & Dehqanian, 2009, p. 1).

Hosseini Kazerouni's (2009) book is another piece of research related to the present study. His book is on non-serious literary types of Persian in the literature of one thousand years of Iran. Hakimi (2008) explored literary jokes in the history of satire, humour and lampoon in Persian literature. Behzadi Andouhjerdi (2000) studied satire and satire writing in Iran. The study is complete research on the social, political, and critical literature of satire. It also analyses the psychological and social reasons behind the creation of different types of satire.

Mir Kiaei (2019) studied the reflection of the actions of political parties in the jokes of the pre-constitutional era, i.e., the Qajar period. In his study, for the jokes that denied the authority of the government, we see the clear disobedience of the public representative to the representative of the government, which ends with the success of the representative of the people, and for the jokes that countered the claim of the inherent superiority of the ruling elite, the rulers' character weaknesses are highlighted. This way, the image that the official narrative had made of them as superhuman beings would be distorted. By taking advantage of these

jokes, people simultaneously challenged the material and dignified domination of the lord of power, and their efforts were mostly focused on neutralizing the dignified domination.

Considering studies related specifically to jokes in Persian, there are also valuable recent works. One study relevant to the subject of this research is Tavoli's et al. (2021) study on the most frequent patterns in forming Persian jokes based on the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) by Attardo (2017). The aforementioned authors find it evident that the shortest possible way of expression appears in the formation of most Persian jokes, which can indicate the effectiveness of shorter jokes. They identify three common patterns and, by means of a questionnaire, determine the best pattern based on laughter-inducing impact. In all three types, the logical mechanism of reasoning, which has more perceptual complexity to some extent, is ineffective and, instead, in all three patterns, the logical mechanism has been of the type of cohabitation relationships with greater ease of understanding. Although the study investigates frequent patterns in forming Persian jokes, since the general theory of verbal humour is the basis for analyses, the study misses some very common patterns which have been used to create many online jokes. The present study has dealt with these common patterns.

Among other studies related to jokes in Persian, Razipour (2020a) conducted a sociological study on jokes related to the Corona Virus. In her study, Razipour says that jokes are popular social texts that can demonstrate and focus on personal/social issues, such as family, health, economy, and politics in critical situations. Naghdipour (2014) also addressed jokes in Iran from a socio-linguistic point of view. In his opinion, ethnic jokes indicate that there is a worrying relationship between ethnic groups, which shows competition to achieve more social and economic opportunities in Iran. Safiri and Shahrzad (2016) investigated a thematic analysis of jokes exchanged in the "Joke Room" show. Their findings showed that jokes, due to their easier influence in popular culture, have been able to declare a position in challenging the power of minor and major groups, religious contexts, criticize behaviours and morals, and express social protests. Tavakoli Rad and Ghaffari (2015) studied the "black joke" and its social interaction and non-constructive consequences. They believe that, in the Iranian context, black jokes have many consequences that appear in different psychological, social, cultural, and political dimensions, and they might go as far as disrupting the cohesion of the society. Forghani and Abdi (2016) studied the representation of women in mobile jokes in Iran. The findings showed that gender jokes have a negative and inferior representation of women and girls compared to men and even boys. Rezvani (2022) tried to identify the language tools for making jokes according to the linguistic and semantic structures of Persian and Russian. This identification was based on the differences in the lexical structure of Russian as a fusional language and Persian as an agglutinative language. Findings showed that the frequency of linguistic examples in two languages is significantly lower than the non-linguistic category, and the frequency of gender and political cases were meaningfully higher than other semantic subsets of jokes.

A large body of modern studies related to Persian jokes are those based on internet jokes. Most of these studies do not directly study the online-ness or internet-based feature of these jokes to investigate the differences between them and previously oral jokes, for example. In these studies, the internet has been only the corpus for the study. Among these, Talebi et al. (2020a) studied the representation of gender characteristics in Persian Telegram jokes. They found that 50% of the total jokes are made up of gender jokes. Gender constructs for men in jokes are more about sex and, for women, they are more about gender stereotypes, which is a kind of redefinition of the social role of women in the current social conditions. Talebi et al. (2020b), in another study, investigated the variability of Telegram Persian jokes before and after the telegram filtering in Iran. Based on the results, restriction has not only not reduced the intensity of jokes and their effectiveness, but also caused more expression of black jokes,

especially in the gender category. It also reduced the number of white jokes for the purpose of just laughing. Also, the challenges of communication and access have led to the change of the joke forms from visual to written.

Razipour (2020b) investigated power relations and position in the family. The corpus for this study was also Telegram jokes. Results showed that family members experience and express different emotions according to their different positions of power and dignity. People who have a lower status experience emotions such as anger, hatred, and despair, but higher-status people express emotions such as satisfaction, pride, and happiness. In another study, Razipour (2020c) conducted a sociological study of the relations of ethnic groups in Iran again with emphasis on Telegram jokes, which showed that ethnic groups try to “compensate for the imbalance of power and position with respect to their superior groups and social distance with their inferior groups by ridiculing and humiliating their peers” (Razipour, 2020c, p. 167).

Masaeli and Heidari-Shahreza (2016) conducted a linguistic analysis of Persian online jokes in light of the General Theory of Verbal Humour. They found 'normal/abnormal' and 'possible/impossible' as the two major types of script opposition in Persian online jokes. In addition, in Persian jokes, among the most common logical strategies for making humour were 'faulty reasoning', 'exaggeration' and 'false analogy'.

### **3. Methodology**

The data collection and analysis of the present study started from collecting humour sources from the earliest cases dating back to around one thousand years ago among the prose and poem writings of Keykavus ibn Eskandar (1021-1087), Rumi (1207-1273), Ferdowsi (940-1019/1025), and later cases in Sa'adi Shirazi (1210-1291/1292). Later cases, like those popular around the Qajar period, ethnic jokes, and popular patterns formed further parts of the data analyses. And finally, an analysis of the content and structure of more recent cases and forms of humour, almost wholly transmitted through social media, was discussed.

### **4. Discussion**

As mentioned earlier, in this study, Persian jokes have been placed under three generations; first (old) generation, second (middle) generation, and third (new) generation. In the following sections, each of these three generations are discussed in detail, which includes the investigation of structure, concept and content, similarities, and differences.

#### **4.1. First (old) generation**

In Iran, as Katouzian (2018) mentions, humour dates back to about eleven hundred years ago and it has had various styles, forms and scopes. Considering the structure, jokes of this generation had mainly one of these two forms: 1) poetry or 2) short stories. Among cases in the form of poetry, one can name Jalal al-Din Rumi's tales in *Masnavi* (1273), Anvari Abivardi's (d. 1189) *qasidehs*, Suzani Samarqandi's (1072-1166) poems, and definitely Sa'adi's (c1210-1292) poems.

Considering the content, as Katouzian discusses, “there has been both verbal and fictional satire, lampoon and buffoonery, some of them soft and subtle, others coarse and even obscene, but all of them more or less amusing, though behind many of them are such motives as anger, revenge, blackmail, sarcasm, mockery, social criticism and so on” (Katouzian, 2018, p. 1). He claims that “we find more indelicate jibes and abuses in Persian satire, especially when matters of sex and honour are brought into them” (Katouzian, 2018, p. 1). Other cases among the

oldest cases of humour in Persian literature are some of Jalal al-Din Rumi's tales in *Masnavi* (1273) which can almost be considered as pornographic humour; although very strange, they are lessons in mysticism. Keykavus ibn Eskandar (1021-1087) wrote *Qabusnameh* which was meant to be used to educate his son. Almost all the anecdotes in *Qabusnameh* have a sort of advice and some have a humorous form. An example is the tale of “a very old and bent man leaning to his walking stick. A young man passing, asks in mockery: how much will you sell your stick? The old man replies: if you wait long enough, life will give it to you for free.”

A long era and period of Persian satire was strictly mixed with harshly rude sex-based content and lexicon. One of these cases of not so ethical satire poets are those by Anvari Abivardi (d. 1189), who as an example wrote “in a long *qasideh* that emptying cesspits is better than writing poetry because that is a useful occupation whereas there is no use in writing poetry” (stated in Katouzian, 2018, p. 4) or the final verse of a poem: “If copulation is what this donkey is doing / Our husbands surely shit on our pussies” (stated in Katouzian, 2018, p. 7). One of the most notorious classic poets was Suzani Samarqandi (1072-1166) who used harsh lampooning and ribaldry in his poems. Later in the thirteenth century, Sa'adi (c. 1210-1292) was the greatest Persian satirist. His satirical works are simple, easy to understand, and containing a notion of advice. Two examples of his satires are: 1) “It is said that an ascetic used to eat so much at nights and later at night, used to pray until dawn. Once a wise man told him that it would be far better if you eat lightly and sleep through the night” and 2) “Someone gets an eye-ache and in order to get cure, he goes to a vet. The vet used for the man what he used for animals and so the man got blind. The man took the vet to the judge. The judge finally said that no compensation is needed, because if the man wasn't a donkey, he wouldn't go to a vet for treatment” (Sa'adi, 2021).

However, it can certainly be claimed that the greatest classical satirist is Obeyd Zakani (c.1300-1370) who was contemporary to Hafiz. He offered strict and sharp criticism towards the social status of the time and protests against injustice, prejudice and extremist religious beliefs. His writings mostly include those in small volumes such as *Cat and Mouse* (Zakani, 2012), *Ethics of the Gentry* (Zakani, 1994), *Joyous Treatment (Resaleh-ye Delgosh)*, *The Hundred Maxims*, etc. *Cat and Mouse* has a brilliant metaphorical theme in which Obeyd Zakani criticizes the extremist and pretending religious men and also criticizes the governors of the time within the characters of mice and cats and within an exemplary satirical poet format. Zakani has many other short anecdotes. The following is an example of Obeyd Zakani's satirical anecdotes: “In a village, there were two donkeys; one male and one female. The owner of the male donkey was a beautiful woman and the owner of the female donkey was a man. Once the female donkey's owner asked the woman: How is it that you demand 5 drachmas for mating my donkey; but if I want to do it to a woman, I should pay ten drachmas? The woman answered ‘show me a prick like this and I will pay you fifty drachmas” (Eqbal, 2011). As observed, harsh and impolite use of language was among the features of classical Persian satires.

Arriving to the twentieth century, humour became popular within the journal format which was aligned with the establishment of the Constitutional Revolution. Ali Akbar Dehkhoda (1879-1955) was among the most prominent satire writers of the new century and was loved for ‘*charand o Parand*’ (2016a) or charivari column in the newspaper *Sur-e Esrafil*. He was popular for the simple and amusing prose and for the deep social and political satire. Another contemporary satire, or better to say, lampoon poem writer was Iraj Mirza (1873-1925) who wrote large numbers of unethical short and long poems. At the same time, in the post-revolutionary era, harsh, lampoon, political and satirical poetry of Aref-e Qazvini (c.1281-1933) and Mirzade-ye Eshqi (1893-1924) were two other significant sources of satire of the time.

After the satirical *poetry* era, Persian jokes, basically, moved towards a *story*-telling structure. This means that the joke was made of a short story which had the structure of a folkloric tale and, at its end, the core and the climax of the story was told. Due to the neglect in keeping the jokes in a written form, almost all the corpora of this type of humour were transferred from person to person in a verbal form. The humorous point of this type of joke is almost always placed at the end of the story (the punchline). The humour type in this kind of joke is basically founded upon the protagonist's stupidity. Other concepts that might make the foundation of this type of joke are naivety, ridicule, deception, and abuse.

#### *4.1.1. Qajar period*

In the pre-constitution period in Iran, i.e., the Qajar period, jokes played a role in denying the authority of the state and “showed the clear disobedience of the mass and their will to openly criticize power without protest. By these jokes, people aimed to fight the ruling power and tried to neutralize domination” (Mir Kiaei, 2019). Perhaps the huge number of satirical writings from the very oldest times of Iran can be attributed to the oppression of the kings, including around thirty satire books remaining from Qajar time.

From the very old ages, there always used to be a clown in kings' courts and castles which is mostly known in Persian as Dalgak<sup>1</sup> or Talkhak<sup>2</sup> who would inform the king of his surrounding persons' or even his own wrongdoings by using satirical language. There are many such Talkhaks' stories in Persian literature and history. Two of the oldest of these clowns have been Sultan Mahmood Ghaznavi's Talkhak and probably more recently, and maybe one the latest, Karim Shireyi in Naser alDdin Shah of Qajar's court.

Later, with the spread of the printing industry in Iran, a number of newspapers with satire style and format started publishing, the most known of which are Sur-e Esrafil (1907-1909), Nahid (1921-1933), Towfigh (1923-1971), Omid (1929-1934), Kashkool (1946-1948), and Bohlool (1978-1981); and without any doubt, the publication of these satire writings opened a wide new window in the history of satire writing in Iran.

#### *4.1.2. Molla NasreDin*

One of the most famous, most common, and probably the oldest collections of old Persian jokes are the funny stories of “Molla NasreDdin” whose stories, jokes and/or name is heard by every Persian speaker; and who is also well-known among Afghan, Turkish, Arab, Caucasian, Indian, and Pakistani folklore cultures. Molla NasreDdin's stories contained mainly delicate moral and advisory points. The most accepted date of Molla NasreDdin's life era is about more than 600 years ago.

In fact, Molla NasreDdin is a witty person who exhibits a philosophical level of thought. However, this character is a symbol of a sometimes-naïve and stupid and sometimes-wise, knowledgeable and good at repartee. “Molla NasreDdin always has an answer for any situation and has no red line or demarcation for himself, ... the audience is often located in a situation where they are eagerly waiting to see what is going to happen; these situations spontaneously have very high excitement and eventually a surprise end” (Kiyani, 2022). His stories, with an apparently humorous plot, try to present pieces of advice.

The following are two samples:

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<sup>1</sup> /dælGæk/

<sup>2</sup> /tælxæk/

*“One day Molla NasreDdin went to a celebration party without being invited. Someone said: Pardon me, Molla, but you weren't invited, why did you come? Molla answered: If the host doesn't know his duty, I know mine, and never neglect it!”*

*“One day one of the neighbours wanted to borrow Molla's donkey. So he went to Molla's house. Molla Nasre Ddin said: I am so sorry, but our donkey is not in the house. Out of Molla's bad luck, the donkey started hee-haw at that very moment! The neighbour said: You said your donkey was not in the house, but now its sound is making the hood deaf! Molla got angry and said: such a stupid and unbelieving person you are! You don't believe what a wise man like me says, but you believe a donkey's hee-haw!”*

Marzolph (1995) studied Molla Nasr al-Din in Persia. Based on Marzolph, analysis of literary sources demonstrates that the presence of Nasr al-Din in Persian literature and culture, goes back to the beginning of the present millennium. Horn (1990) pointed out many similarities to a large number of Nasr al-Din anecdotes in the work of ‘Obayd-e Zakani’. Earlier, Wesselski (1911) mentions a number of Horn's instances and puts forward a considerable point. He claims that:

Zakani records several of the Nasr al-Din's stories in the name of Juha. Juha is a largely known character in Arab culture. In the following centuries, Juha mixed into the later version of Nasr al-Din. This went up to the point that within the present culture and tradition of the Near East, these two characters cannot be distinguished from one another and now they should be considered as forming one and same character.

(mentioned in Marzolph, 1995, p. 159).

According to Marzolph (1995), the earliest mention of Juha's name appears in the divan of Manuchehri (Dabir-Siyaqi, 1947/1326 Sh.) in a poem line:

*Andar in ayyam-e ma bazar-e hazl ast o fosus  
kar-e Bu Bakr-e robabi darad o tanz-e Johi*

In our day the market deals in jokes and jests, alas.

It deals in the deeds of Abu Bakr the robab player and the ridicule of Juha

(Marzolph, 1995, p. 160)

The next presence of Juha, considering the time, is in Rumi's celebrated Masnavi-ye ma'navi (Marzolph, 1995). Based on almost all studies on Nasr al-Din (Marzolph, 1995; Horn, 1990; Christensen, 1922), Juha or Juhi, or other similar names, have been claimed to be an unclear character that Turkish and Arabic speakers used to found their satirical stories upon, whose anecdotes are taken from those of Nasr al-Din's; in other words, they refer to the same persona.

#### 4.1.3. Ethnic jokes

Iran has 28 provinces in which different ethnic groups live and use different languages, dialects and accents; the languages are Persian, Turkish, Kurdish, Lurish, Baluchi, Armenian, and Arabic. Naghdipour tries to classify Persian jokes based on their targets and to investigate their functions as to what different individuals may project, hide, or simply demonstrate while exchanging jokes (Naghdipour, 2014, p. 110). He believes that “linguistic diversity, which oftentimes corresponds to a spectrum of ethnic diversity, has become a distinctive determiner when it comes to joking practices across the country. The socio-economic rivalry among social strata in more populated urban areas could be another reason for the birth of jokes, in particular, ethnic jokes” (Naghdipour, 2014, p. 106). As another reason for the birth of ethnic jokes Naghdipour states that:

after the revolution ... many people moved to big cities in search for better living standards, job opportunities, and education. The new lifestyle exerted a huge pressure on these immigrants to assimilate into new linguistic and social groups. Their reluctance to an easy and quick conformity to the mainstream social norms and their rivalry with the established majority for the better social and economic well-being turned more obstinate minorities into the targets of ethnic jokes.

(Naghdipour, 2014, p. 106.)

Boskin and Dorinson (1985) believe that “ethnic jokes are the most popular and frequent jokes that home in on the social differences and rivalries between different groups, mostly used by the established majority to display their social, economic, and political power or superiority to the minority ethnic groups” (stated in Naghdipour, 2014, p. 108).

This generation of Persian jokes can be said to have lasted for more than 30 years. By this stability we mean that although the language typology, i.e., the lexicon within the joke slowly changed from Old Persian vocabulary to newer Persian words, the plot and structure remained unchanged, i.e., the form of a short story telling. During the latest years of this era, jokes in Persian mistakenly moved towards ethnic jokes, which unfortunately lasted for a long time; that is why this point in this era is not such a prideful and bright point in Persian satire’s history. As regards this generation, Abedinifard (2016a) investigated the structural functions of a targeted joke in the Iranian context, which can be known as the Qazvini man, a predatory homosexual. As he states, these jokes almost always started with a phrase like: “There was once a Turk (or a Lor, a Rashti, a Qazvini, and so on) . . .” (Abedinifard, 2016a), in which Turk, Lor, Rashti and Qazvini are different ethnic groups of Iran. The phrase started a substantial number of jokes in Persian which addressed specific ethnic character types.

This is exactly in accordance with Davies’ (1990, p. 320) claim that “ethnic jokes are conceived here to be ones in which not only the content of the jokes but also their very structure depends on the use of ethnicity”. As claimed by Abedinifard (2016a), this Persian ethnic humour concerned *Shahrestani* people, that is, people from regions other than the capital city, Tehran. It has been attributed to more than just the Qazvin region and people, and has been so clear that even Burke and Elliott (2008, p. 49) in their tourist guidebook introduce a number of them, such as: “men from Rasht portrayed as sexually liberal and constantly cuckold, Shirazis as lazy, Turkmen as vengeful, Kurds as hot blooded, LORS as congenitally untrustworthy, Azaris as slow-witted, Iranian Arab men as to be endowed with impressive set of wedding tackle and Esfahanis to be cunning and tight with money” (Burke & Elliott, 2008, p. 49). Also, Abedinifard (2018) investigated Persian ‘Rashti jokes’ as modern Iran’s palimpsests of gheyrat-based masculinity. He says that their humour contains the main themes associated with the Rashti-husband/man-as-a-cuckold and the Rashti-wife/woman-as-sexually-loose stereotypes (Abedinifard, 2018, p. 2). Abedinifard (2018) restates one such a joke: “the Rashti man, upon entering a shop to buy a wardrobe, asks the shopkeeper, ‘Do you have a wardrobe that has no one in it when I come home?’” (after Nabavi, 2012).

The main issue about ethnic jokes is not that they negatively discuss an ethnic group; yet, it creates a circle of similar jokes and, as Attardo (2001) believes, unlike a single joke, an ethnic joke creates a cycle of jokes with similar theme that will circulate quickly throughout the whole culture in which that ethnicity exists. Each type of ethnic jokes which relates to a specific region or group has a root of where and why it originated. For example, for Rashti jokes, Abedinifard (2018) suggests that:

in this immediate historical context, Rashti jokes exercised a disciplinary function in terms of gender hegemony by scapegoating the imaginary Rashti male character to teach other Iranian men a gendered lesson, depicting the consequences of men’s loosening control on their female kin and this corrective function, as he shows through examining contextualized contemporary cases of Rashti jokes, seems to have lasted to this day.

(Abedinifard, 2018, p. 3).

This means that this joke stereotype is not based on reality. And considering the notion of origin, Abedinifard (2016b) claims “that sometime between the early twentieth century and the 1950s, the Rashti jokes originated and gained public recognition. Assuming this possible origination, we can claim that in its immediate historical context, the Rashti joke cycle served a disciplinary function towards both the ethnic and the gender orders” (stated in Abedinifard, 2018, p. 15).

Concerning the analysis of ethnic jokes' feature, Davies (2011) claims that “it is difficult and dangerous to deduce much from the analysis of a single joke, but one is on far, far surer ground when considerable numbers of jokes exist with a common theme” (stated in Abedinifard, 2018, p. 4). Also, Billig (2005) explains that the “context does not necessarily refer to the immediate person-to-person context in which a joke is told. It can also refer to a more general ideological or political context that can affect the understanding and meaning of a joke” (stated in Abedinifard, 2018, p. 4).

#### 4.2. Second (middle) generation

The second generation of jokes in Persian spread and became popular with the emergence of new communication devices. This type of humour, both structurally and conceptually, had a considerable change compared to the previous generation. From the structural view, the new generation of Persian jokes was no longer stated as a short story. This type of jokes often had a two-part structure consisting of an onset and an offset section. However, it can carefully be said that this type of joke had two punch lines. The first punch line or, to say, the weak punch line, is placed at the end of the onset section. The second punch line or, to say, the main punch line, forms the offset section. Sometimes, the offset of the story is a totally meaningless satire which is sometimes funny due to being so meaningless, as in:

*“My cousin, who is only 15, has posted a selfie with a cigarette in his hand and captioned: My lungs are gonna pay the atonement of your leaving.  
I commented: Does your dad, too, know it or should I tell him myself?  
25 missed calls in 2 minutes! Unbelievable!”*

In the above example, the joke can be divided into the two previously mentioned parts:

**Onset:**

*“My cousin, who is only 15, has posted a selfie with a cigarette in his hand and captioned: My lungs are gonna pay the atonement of your leaving.  
I commented: Does your dad, too, know it or should I tell him myself?”*

**Offset:**

*25 missed calls in 2 minutes! Unbelievable!”*

Although it might seem that the joke itself carries the main load of fun, the truth is that it is the last, unrelated, nonsense sentence or utterance, which is in fact the funniest part.

The following are some examples of these unrelated funny-ending utterances used in jokes:

*“Someone texted me: Do you recognize?  
I said: not really... you?  
Says: you idiot, I'm your GF, how did you not recognize my handwriting?!  
I'm drinking acid, cheers to everyone”*

*“Did you know that the number of each person's eyelashes, is the number of his life's years?  
I didn't know either,  
Copy and send, it's dog eat dog!”*

*“My dad says: shame on you! When Napoleon was at your age, he was the first grader in class!  
I said: When Napoleon was at your age, he was the Emperor!  
It's so fun playing with the cats in the trash in the alley”*

*“The garbage collector comes at the door and says to the girl: Do you have garbage?  
The girl shouts: MOM! Do we have garbage?  
Mom says: yes, we do.  
The girl says to the man: Yes, we have, thanks so much! We don't need for now.  
Luckily, the garbage collector was arrested when eating dynamite.”*

The following are some examples of the unrelated (yet funny) ending offsets of the new generation jokes:

*“I would bow to this reply, if I were science”  
“I'll jump into your throat with both legs, if you say you'd heard this (joke) before”  
“I was so convinced that my ass nerve was torn”  
“Copy and send, it's dog eat dog!”  
“From the book ‘Cows fly, Donkeys believe’”*

Conceptually, the concepts in this generation had a shift from the unreal world and ethnic funny stories to the real, today world's issues and problems or so-called fantasies of the young generation. Among the topics which were dealt with within this generation of jokes were family relationships and the relation between parents and children, which were rarely ever mentioned, relations with relatives, occupational and educational issues, and similar social issues. As an example:

*“Have you seen in movies when a child screams in sleep, his parents come and hug him?!  
I once screamed in sleep... My dad gave such a kick in my stomach that I cannot scream for five years now!  
I think my scream bag has been torn!”*

Since, in the ideal form, the purpose of satire is to present and state the society's issues and problems, it can be said that this generation of Persian jokes was the beginning of this path and, through stating some true humanistic issues, although very small, had a role in the correction and betterment of social issues and problems.

Amongst the features of this joke generation, a number can be mentioned here. The first were the structures of the joke which we call *viral* structures. This means that once a structure of joke was created, there was a countless number of jokes placed within the format of that structure.

As a case of these structures, we can mention the “pa na pa” (/pæ 'næ pæ/) format. Literally, the structure means “No doubt” or, more accurately, considering a joke's context, “No shit”, or “No shit, Sherlock” or “Thank you, captain obvious”. For example:

*“I went to the chicken shop, I say: you got wings?  
He says: Chicken wings?  
I say: No shit, Sherlock, plane wings! We crashed a few lanes farther, I wanna fix the plane.”*

*"I took the chicken out of the freezer; He says: you wanna cook food?  
I say: No shit, Sherlock, her family has come to take her from the morgue  
to bury."*

On this type of joke, Kheyraadi (2013) conducted an investigation on how the violation of Grice's Conversational Maxims can result in the creation of "pa na pa" (*No shit Sherlock*) jokes. What Kheyraadi mentions as a main point about this structure and type of the joke (just like what we state here about this generation) is that this structure moves its focus and content of humour, from accents, dialects and tribes towards social and communicational weaknesses of the society; and that they tend towards a path other than insulting and making fun of sub-cultures and tribes.

A second type or feature of this generation of Persian jokes is joking with reference to great (usually old) figures like great old poets, writers, politicians, thinkers, and alike. In these jokes, a funny utterance was attributed to a great figure, like:

*"Hey, Jafar, put that cigarette away, a collared (pigeon) came... get up and sprinkle some seeds!  
(Avicenna and his friend, playing with the pigeons)*

*"A man saying: I love only YOU,  
is like a woman saying: I ONLY windowshop, I won't buy anything!"*

*Victor Hugo*

As said, for these jokes, a pattern was created that a huge number of further jokes followed. As another example of these viral patterns, there used to be the pattern:

/aqa            ma            ſoma<sup>3</sup>  
Fellow, I (we) .....,            you .....

It must be mentioned that the first subject person is pronounced as /ma/ which means "we". However, in this pattern, the "we" does not mean the first person plural, which is a humorous form of addressing oneself, i.e., "I".

This pattern was used to either humorously criticize a person who is considering him/herself higher than others, or simply (again humorously) humbleness or friendship towards someone. Examples of this pattern are:

Fellow, I, toilet paper, you wet wipe.

Fellow, I, bitter end of cucumber, you pineapple mask.

Fellow, I, omelet, you barbecue.

Fellow, I, science book of grade one, you university physics.

(examples from Meghdari & Izad doust, 2017)

Meghdari and Izad doust (2017) conduct a precise analysis of this pattern based on the violation of Grice's Conversational Maxims. They claim that this violation causes lying, ridicule, exaggeration, emphasis, insult... and humour among Persian speakers. Their findings show the intentional use of the violation technique of Grice's Maxims, especially two maxims, of Quantity and Relevance, in the creation of the humorous situation. Meghdari and Izad doust consider the most significant features of this humour pattern as follows. 1. The conversational structure of this pattern is a monologue and usually consists of two utterances. 2. In the first utterance, the speaker creates a simile context. S/he exaggeratedly compares him/herself to something worthless (yet this simile is accompanied with the violation of the two maxims of

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آقا<sup>3</sup> ، ما.....، شما .....

Quantity and Relevance). This simile occurs by addressing him/herself as /ma/ which again is a sign of humbleness. 3. In the second utterance, the creation of a simile occurs for the addressed person. However, this time the resemblance is exaggerated to something highly precious. This is also along with addressing the other person with the two words of /aqa/ (meaning sir, or fellow) for the praising and high personification of the addressed person and /jomā/ which is the respectful form of addressing the other person.

### 4.3. Third (new) generation

Considering content, the last generation of Persian jokes, which is currently the most common form of joke in Persian, is called here the Third or New generation. This type of jokes is directly built upon the everyday events of the society and the social, cultural, political, and economic issues and problems. On the description of this type, we can say that the jokes have taken a form so that if you do not listen to the news, you do not get the meaning. This means that the joke in Persian has reached the closest position to its ultimate goal. In other words, humour or satire has taken its responsibility to demonstrate humane and social problems and it is being used on the right and purposeful path. This generation discusses social issues of the day; someone ridicules or mocks a bad, wrong or sad event or a belief from a part of or the whole society or government with the purpose of correcting it. In addition, in this generation of the joke, absurd concepts and meaningless satire are observed to a considerably lesser extent. Another positive feature of this generation is the far less ethnic issues in it, which is a sign of higher awareness of jokes' creators and users.

However, the present generation of humour in Persian seems to have two most prominent and significant features. First, considering structure, the third generation does not have a story-like structure like the first generation and it neither has a dual structure like the second generation. The structure of the third generation of Persian jokes is mostly in the form of the media. In other words, they are no longer jokes to *tell* but to *see*, i.e., they are mostly pictures or videos or multimodal items, such as memes (text + image). It can be said that you almost no longer hear a joke told by someone at all. Almost 99 percent of the humorous and satirical content is transferred through (social)media. As Sturges discusses, “the past 70 years have seen the mutation of comedy from an art or entertainment performed entirely to live audiences to a form also disseminated by mass media and now, in particular, by social media” (Sturges, 2015, p. 2). As said, the new generation of jokes is no more just a joke, they are often *memes*.

The term “Internet meme” refers to any piece of culture that becomes viral on the internet. Memes on the internet include a wide range of categories including pictures, videos, GIFs, and jokes in the textual form (Holland, 2020). The term 'meme' was coined by Richard Dawkins (1976) to define any small piece from a culture which moves from one person to another through copying or imitation (cited in Shifman, 2013). Today, according to Tække (2005), digital media allows for the production, editing, processing, storing, copying, distributing, and retrieving knowledge by the use of a single medium. This cultural-technological shift shows why Persian jokes have increasingly used the meme format—in order to engage more audience, they now rely on rapid visual-textual format.

And second, as it is expected and seen within memes in all languages and cultures, Persian third generation memes are very fast. This means that comparing to a joke forty years ago, for example, which took about 30 seconds and up to 1 minute to reach the punch line, the present memes do not take more than 10 seconds to transfer what they are meant to transfer, aligning with the compressed, high-speed format described by Zharova (2018) and Harper (2025). Putting it differently, present memes do not have a punch line in the form that the older generation jokes did. A picture (or a short video) is accompanied with a text and the humorous content is thus transferred.

## 5. Conclusion

In this study, three generations of Persian jokes, from the past to the present day, were introduced and the transformations and changes in Persian jokes, both structural and conceptual, were analysed.

Considering the structure of jokes, there have been considerable changes in Persian jokes through the last millennium. First generation jokes basically had a *story format* which was told by a speaker or joke teller. In addition, almost all jokes within that generation had what is widely known as a *punch line*. As defined by Raskin (1985, p. 99), jokes are “simple canned stories with punch lines, which are easy to remember and tell”. In other words, the story had no sense of humour until it reached the punch line which was in the last sentence of the joke, and the part that carried the main load of satire.

The second generation started and spread with the emergence of media in the form of short text messages. Short messaging systems provided the opportunity to transfer jokes to others by *sending* them rather than *telling* them. One very specific feature in the structure of the second-generation jokes was that jokes mostly followed a number of patterns that had appeared in this very generation (patterns like dual parts (onset/offset)). These patterns made it, in some ways, necessary for this generation of jokes to be only *sent* by text messaging, rather than fit for oral *telling*. In other words, most offset sections of jokes could not carry satire or cause laughter when *told*; they could have the desired meaning only in the written form and when *read* by the audience and not *heard*. This feature, from its own side, intensified the emergence and creation of more patterns for jokes. From another point of view, as it is globally known, some people are good at telling jokes and some are not. In the first-generation jokes, you had to be good at telling jokes if you wanted to tell one. But in the second generation, since you did not have to be good at telling jokes, you could make and tell more jokes by simply sending them. This, too, caused the creation of more and more jokes. So the second generation, considering the quantity, resulted in a huge corpus of jokes. Later, with the emergence of the first social media platforms, sources like groups or channels were made with the purpose of simply spreading jokes. This was still before the creation of concepts like memes as we know them today.

Although one could consider the changes from the first to second generation as really considerable, the third generation of Persian jokes made a *revolution* in the structure of jokes by the use of social media. This revolution was made through the mixture of texts with (mainly) photos or (sometimes) videos, which created the concept of memes. As discussed in the discussion section, memes caused two main changes in the overall concept and feature of jokes. The first was related to the time taken in order for the audience to get the satirical point in the joke. This reduction in time consumption was, in turn, caused by the second main change by the third generation, which was that jokes in the third generation were meant to be *seen* rather than to be *read*. The new generation of humans lives among an incredibly fast-moving stream of data from different sources. It is as if a man does not have enough free time to read a three-line joke. So when a short text accompanies a related photo, the audience can reach the target point, i.e., the funny point, or, as in earlier generations, the punch line, faster.

As for the content, the first generation, although it dealt with subjects like ethnic jokes and sex/gender-based issues such as those by Iraj Mirza, also had a large corpus of jokes with subjects like ridiculing the kings or governors, which we assumed to be the real and ultimate purpose of jokes. A large corpus of this generation jokes is in the form of poetry, such as those by Jalal al-Din Rumi's *Masnavi*, Anvari Abivardi's *qasidehs*, Suzani Samarqandi's poems and Sa'adi's poems. A part of the first-generation jokes, as far as they could be traced back in time and history, were present since the time of kings of various dynasties like Qajar. A large number of these jokes were passed by word of mouth amongst the society. Another part of

these jokes, which are mainly those that have been recorded somewhere, are those told by Dalhgaks or Talkhaks (clowns) of the kings' courts. These jokes, partly made the king himself laugh, and partly made fun of the king himself. Later, in the time era of more recent kings like those of Pahlavi, these critical jokes were spread through the first forms of media which were printed media such as newspapers. Another large body of these jokes was dedicated to ethnic jokes, which mainly started with a phrase like: "There was once a Turk (or a Lor, a Rashti, a Qazvini, and so on)..." (Abedinifard, 2016a), which addressed specific ethnic character types.

The second-generation jokes, when seen from the view of content, had seen large changes compared to the previous generation. The second generation started to challenge issues that were not so popular amongst older jokes. These new issues included four main topics: 1) in-family relations, such as parental features or parent-child relations, 2) teenage characteristics, 3) ridiculing valued authorities and celebrities, and 4) ridiculing low/high-level relations. In other words, the second generation was a pioneer in ridiculing or criticizing issues that were not normally criticized before; criticism of parents by teens, criticism of obvious facts (*No shit, Sherlock* pattern), ridiculing (mostly) women's stupidity, and joking about famous people like Iranian or foreign poets, scientists or thinkers. Also, the content of the second-generation jokes contains a considerably higher amount of nonsense satire compared to the first generation. The nonsense offsets in some joke patterns, which were also the punch lines, demonstrates this fact. This was also discussed by Meghdari and Izad doust (2017) who found the violation of Grice's Conversational Maxims in one of the patterned Persian jokes, especially the maxim of Relevance. In fact, this generation used Irrelevance as the source of satire creation.

The third-generation jokes, considering content, are directly built upon the everyday events of the Iranian society and the social, cultural, political, and economic issues and problems. The third-generation jokes ridicule and criticize a considerably wider range of topics such as governors or statesmen, economic inflation, religious extremism, relations with foreign countries, in-family relations, low/high-level relations, foreign statesmen (which is caused by the increase in knowledge of other countries' issues), relations with relatives, online shopping, animals, boyfriend/girlfriend relations (which used to be taboo in older generations), accidents, online chats and applications, TV characters and shows, traditions and proverbs, and many more. As observed, the topics of the jokes have broadened significantly in the present-day generation of Persian jokes. A significant point to remember related to the topics of the third generation is that a high percentage of these jokes have the goal of correcting something in the real world, and not just to make laughter.

Along this path, this real-world correcting is what grabs the attention more than anything else. Over time, Persian jokes have experienced a wide range of social dynamics, reflecting both constructive and controversial elements, and expressing moral ambiguities along the way. Even today, we can see wrong and inappropriate forms in Persian jokes like ethnic or immoral issues. However, considering the fact that the majority of jokes are narrating social issues, it can be said that this is apparently what is expected from true humour, satire and joke. Therefore, after passing through a path with about a millennium length, we can say that the joke in Persian is standing in a place nearest to the correct and targeted place, which is the reflection of society.

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